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# The European experience with Japanese animation, and what it can reveal about the transnational appeal of anime

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## ABSTRACT

This article discusses the impact of Japanese animated cartoons (or 'anime') in two European key markets, Italy and France. It first provides a theoretical perspective on anime's features that appeal to global audiences, pointing out 'universal' and 'particular' aspects of this medium's contents, morals, storytelling, and visual styles. The author posits that the notion taken for granted in much scholarship as well as among Japanese government agencies, according to which anime's popularity would be mainly due to its being 'cool', is overrated, arguing that it is elsewhere that the audience's affection is to be identified. The second part discusses the success of anime in Italy and France from the late 1970s, showing how its deep popular penetration in the two countries was due to its sudden and massive presence in an age dominated by a model of media consumption based on nationwide broadcastings and theatrical releases. The crisis of such model due to changes in media content's distribution and consumption, which occurred from the 2000s on, did not severely affect anime's popularity in these two markets, by virtue of the depth of its previous mainstream circulation: a phenomenon the author reads also through the Gramscian category of 'national-popular'.

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## 1. Introduction

Those who research within the frameworks of communication and media in Asia know that the impact of Japanese animated cartoons, or 'anime', has involved many Asian national contexts over the decades, often in combination with or followed by 'manga', that is, comics made in Japan (Shiraishi, 1997). However, it would be a mistake to avoid broader contextualisations on how Japan-made animated series and films, seen as highly creative and exportable media outputs, have been reaching audiences beyond Asia. In fact, seeing how anime works have been received elsewhere—other than in Asian countries—can give a wider perspective on the continuities and ruptures among the phenomena of arrival and success of this creative content carrier overseas.

For this reason, in dealing with the themes of transitions in foreign markets and the emotional and narrative appeal of Japanese commercial animations, this article utilises

the case of Western Europe as receiving context in the 1970s-1980s and afterwards. There are a few comprehensive contributions on the circulation of anime and manga in North America (Brienza, 2016; Daliot-Bul & Otmazgin, 2017; Kelts, 2007) as well as on Asian experiences (Hernández & Hirai, 2015; Koh, 2013; Otmazgin, 2013; Yokota & Hu, 2013). But in all of these contributions there is almost no mention of Europe, although this vibrant continent—a group of diverse national markets and a region from which many international co-productions with Japanese animation studios were initiated—is anything but disconnected from the anime industry's success overseas.

First of all, we provide a quick clarification on the meaning of 'anime'. The word is the contraction of the English word 'animation' transliterated according to the Japanese pronunciation (*animēshon*); it indicates animated theatrical films, TV series, or direct-to-video films and mini-series, made by Japanese creators and production studios—even when part of the technical work may be completed via foreign outsourcing—mainly through the technique of 'cel' animation. In English, anime is usually referred to in the singular form, as a medium or popular art, however it can and must alternatively be also intended in the plural form, as an overall body of works.

To begin framing the topic and its implications, we will here list a few elements that can be taken into account for the assessment of anime's sociocultural impact anywhere in the world. In this article it will be possible to notice how the dialectics between mainstream and subcultural penetration that have been observed in the various European contexts could be also evaluated for the study of the Asian contexts. We will highlight the cases of Italy and France, showing why they are particularly relevant and how they can be, up to a point, compared to certain Asian experiences with respect to the overall flows of communication, inter- and transnationally.

The first element to be considered is whether the media-related processes in a national context with a foreign entertainment form such as anime are ruled by mainstream (top-down) forms of distribution and consumption or by subcultural (bottom-up) dynamics centred on fandom. In the case of the relationship of Italy and France with anime since the late 1970s and till the mid-2000s, such process was definitely dominated by pronounced mainstream media flows and ways of consumption, and it could therefore be compared, when looking at Asia, to the cases of the Philippines (Bravo, 2012; Ortuoste, 2017) and South Korea (Seon, 2015; Kim, 2010; Kim, Unger, & Wagner, 2017).

On the opposite side of an ideal graded scale from mainstream to subcultural distribution and consumption, the fandom-driven circulation of anime and manga in currently less open social-cultural Asian contexts, like China, is nearer to the case of Russia, the European country closest to China in terms of both official border control and political protectionism against the entry of foreign cultural outputs (for China: Ishii, 2013 and Tian, 2016; for Russia: Magera, 2018).

In an intermediate zone we observe Asian countries such as Malaysia, Indonesia, and India (Bryce, Barber, Kelly, Kunwar, & Plumb, 2010; Lent, 2001; Mihara, 2017; Yamato, Eric Krauss, Tamam, Hassan, & Nizam Osman, 2011). The mixed approaches to anime in these markets, amidst massive bootleg importation and scarce official broadcastings, resemble homologue experiences in Europe in countries where the impact of anime occurred through the media systems of neighbour nations: the initial circulation of anime/manga in Portugal, Switzerland, Germany, Austria, Greece, and the Balkan countries usually passed via derivative importations from Spain, France and Italy, or

even via the capture of the aerial broadcastings of foreign television stations; for instance, Italian TV channels' signals were and are regularly intercepted by private antennas in Slovenia, the countries of former Yugoslavia, Malta, etc. (insight on EU countries and anime is in Johnson-Woods, 2010 and Pellitteri, 2014a).

Having this rough picture in mind for future reference, in this article it will hopefully appear clear why the European experience with Japanese animation is relevant not only per se but also as a possible paragon for further and articulated comparative analysis on the modalities of arrival, overall impact, and transcultural reception of anime/manga in other national-cultural contexts.

## 2. Methodological note

The discussion provided in this article is corroborated with part of the primary data we collected over the course of three mixed methods research projects carried out in Japan and Europe between 2013 and 2019. Mixed methods research is so labelled because it makes use of both qualitative and quantitative methods of data collection and analysis. Namely, the general research design used for the area of our work focussing on the transnational appeal of anime and manga and their popularity in Europe is a model specially tailored for a multi-stage enquiry and that could be defined as a blend of explanatory sequential design and convergent design. Explanatory sequential design consists of using quantitative methods first and qualitative methods after, to help explain the former; convergent design uses both quantitative and qualitative methods and then, through various techniques, merges or compares the two kinds of data. Our syncretic design used elements of both models, integrating batches of the two data sets to provide a multi-layered explanatory discussion.

Over the course of our three mutually integrated projects, the quantitative investigation (surveys in seven European countries) mainly targeted manga and anime's audiences and their consumption histories and practices, while the qualitative investigation targeted a variety of professionals, focussing on transnational production and distribution processes. Within these projects, in fact, we conducted interviews with a substantial number of Japanese creators, directors, animators, music composers, producers, and editors working in the anime and manga industries, as well as with European and Japanese television and cinema distributors, manga/anime publishers, brokers, and television policy makers. To give an idea of the size of the overall fieldwork during these three projects: the total number of interviews finalised is 120; the other main data collected consist of questionnaire-based surveys in Italy, France, Germany, Switzerland, Spain, Poland, and Slovenia (with a cumulative sample of over 4500 respondents), plus archive research in Europe and Japan, and numerous visits at manga/anime-related B2C and B2B fairs and conventions.

Out of the 120 interviews, only eight were conducted as email exchanges. All the other were conducted as face to face conversations, usually 75–90 min long; with some exceptions, they were usually tape-recorded, and conducted in either English, French, Spanish, Italian, or Japanese; they took place in a room of the interviewee's company headquarters, more rarely during a professional gathering (an animation market fair, a comics convention, a film festival, etc.).<sup>1</sup>

### 3. Transmediality of anime as a tool of Japan's popularity overseas

In every national media system, we can find broad trends: general features characterising that system. In wider terms, a media system—be it national, international, transnational—has been defined as a ‘media ecosystem’ (Lopez, 2012; for an overview of Japan’s media ecosystem, cf. Hernández-Pérez, 2018, pp. 176–83); in our specific context involving Japanese animation, we will borrow the definition according to which an ecosystem, as a concept and concretely, ‘differs from the one of industry, market or sector, because it relies on the prevalence of external effects’ (Bomsel, 2014). In relation to Japan, this brings us to the intellectual properties or IPs, the characters of anime, and the dynamics of Japanese mass culture and creative industries. This complex mechanism was already in the 1990s labelled a ‘media mix’ by Irie Yoshio, a top-level manager at one of the major publishers and IP owners in Japan, Kōdansha (Schodt, 1996, pp. 92–4).

Today, Japanese pop-cultural franchises are no longer—as they were, as a general trend, until around 1990—mainly a domestic business addressed to an audience comprised almost entirely of Japanese kids and adult so-called *otaku*, or hardcore fans. After the experiences of successful exportations to Europe and the United States in multiple time spans, the anime industry today shows, despite a still dominant attitude to a pronounced inward orientation, the signs of a more ambitious, momentum-gaining international and transnational venture. Japanese scholar and former JETRO employee Mihara Ryōtarō, in fact, in his outstanding research on the anime industry’s struggle to deal with the potentially global extension of its markets, wrote: ‘The strong tendency to prioritise the Japanese domestic market and peripheralise overseas ones in everyday business practices [is] one of the critical factors that makes the Japanese anime sector unable and unwilling to cultivate overseas markets’ (Mihara, 2017, p. 22). This feature of the industry until the 1990s and then a more definite openness to foreign markets was also underlined in several interviews we conducted with Japanese companies’ executives and producers, among whom that with anime producer Inoue Hiroaki (Inoue, 2017). Nonetheless, the transmediality that increasingly informs Japan’s creative industries, and in particular those based on visual characters, has been noticed by Japan’s government agencies: since the mid-2000s, they attempt to exploit a perceived ‘cultural power’ of characters and stories from manga and anime (Bouissou, 2006). Japanese policy makers have hence come to believe that the creative industries—especially manga, anime, and video games—can be instrumental to the empowerment of the country in a global scenario (Asō, 2006; IPSP, 2006): in 2010, the government initiated the ‘Cool Japan’ initiatives (METI, 2012) and a specific section of those media operations has been labelled ‘brand nationalism’ (Iwabuchi, 2010). We can argue that, from the standpoint of the Japanese governmental actors and agencies, this process could be seen as a consequence and a desirable outcome of that flattering expression, ‘Japan’s gross national cool’, proposed in 2002 by Douglas McGray in an influential article.

This applies to Japanese animation as a huge concentration of characters and stories that have demonstrated an outstanding appeal among children, teenagers, and young adults all around the world. Trust in anime franchises is proven by the progressive re-internationalisation of the business in recent years (Shichijō, 2018; Takayama, 2018), after a decade and a half of an inward tendency that had followed an initial period of expansion in Europe in the 1980s–1990s. Today, the revenues from Japanese IPs

related to or centred on animation are gradually growing again. This is especially true in the case of particularly famous franchises overall representative of visual imagination and storytelling made in Japan: narrative universes pertaining to anime as well as manga and, often, video games, such as *Captain Tsubasa*, *Doraemon*, *SuperMario*, *Hello Kitty*, *Dragon Ball*, *One Piece*, *Tetsuwan Atom (Astro Boy)*, *Sailor Moon*, *Naruto*, *Crayon Shin-chan*, *Yōkai Watch*, and *Pretty Cure*, among hundreds more. The IPs just mentioned here, moreover, were not randomly listed; they are the main franchises chosen to advertise and promote the 2020 (postponed to 2021) Tokyo Olympics as ‘ambassadors’ of Japan, thus placing anime on the main stage.

As a further application of this discussion, it is worth to mention the frequent divergence between the popularity of anime as a pop-cultural output outside of Japan and its potential policy-related impact in terms of soft power (on which cf. Nye, 1990 and 2004). This notion implies the role of anime as a medium and content platform for the image of Japan overseas, which should be considered case by case, that is, country by country. In some, in fact, anime gained favour among *fan niches*: e.g. United States, Australia, Israel; in others, it was met with a longstanding success across *entire generations* of children and youths, thanks to a massive and prolonged distribution through nationwide TV broadcasts: in Italy, France and francophone Canada, Spain, Mexico and other Latin-American countries, Lebanon, South Korea, and the Philippines. In this sense, we have to consider the position of specific anime characters or genres in different regions, sub-regions, or countries, in order to understand, for instance, why *Captain Tsubasa* or *Doraemon*, among others, were chosen as ambassadors of the planned Tokyo Olympics in a world-famous video clip (Olympic Channel, 2016): in Europe, a few countries of Central Asia, and Latin America, *Captain Tsubasa* is very famous (Okazaki, 2006), but *Doraemon* is not; on the contrary, *Doraemon*—a franchise for little kids—is beloved in East and Southeast Asia, and *Captain Tsubasa*—an anime on soccer—is little considered, or almost ignored, in the United States. Thus, the cases of anime’s mainstream presence and popularity in Italy and France (discussed later on, § 5–6–7) will be used to stress the importance of dedicated, focussed analyses and the usefulness of having a look at Europe when considering the impact and specific features of Japanese animation in Asia or anywhere.

#### **4. Universal and particular traits of anime’s appeal through an outstanding case *one Piece* as a paradigm to explain anime/manga’s transcultural success**

For decades, anime, followed by manga, then video games made in Japan, have gone overseas either legally or through fan piracy, despite often being stigmatised as a minor, ‘ugly’, ‘dangerous’ form of entertainment in Europe, Asia, and the United States. Nonetheless, anime series and films have been acclaimed by growing fan communities and are warmly remembered by former kids who are now in their thirties and forties; this, in Asia as in any other place where anime prospered in one way or another. This long term result was, in often cases, achieved without any official policy from Japan, but on the basis of commercial dynamics in the transnational ecosystems involving the brokering, broadcasting, publishing, distribution, and release of these franchises as well as, in many instances, the constellation of associated licensed commodities.

Now, the process of ‘exploitation’ of these imaginary heroes and narrative environments by the Japanese government might produce a backlash in popularity, by depriving them of their relative independence from institutional officiality. This looks even more markedly like a risk in so far as the usage of these characters by the government may emphasise their fictional appeal (Walsh, 2007), but impoverish them from the perspective of their original and often deep narratives and contents, which are anything but relatable to politics and official policies (Otmazgin, 2011). The narratives embedded in beloved franchises may thus be flattened into shallow fictions, deprived of depth by brand nationalism’s policies.

In this section, we provide a reflection on the aesthetic and narrative dimensions of anime’s appeal, pointing at both ‘particular’ and ‘universal’ elements of fascination; in effect, it is from combinations of these two layers of significance that anime (and manga) showed to hold the ability to hook such diverse audiences from different cultures. The ‘particular universality’ of anime has in fact been seldom analysed by scholars (but see Bouissou, 2011; Bouissou, Pellitteri, Dolle-Weinkauff, & Beldi, 2010; Pellitteri, 2018a). The reasons for anime’s appeal are numerous, and many among them lie upon the basic notion that anime are totally *alternative* to cartoons made in Western Europe or North America. Alternative both in the sense of a different possible choice and in the sense of a pronounced otherness. Anime are often constituted of drawings that manage to be captivating even when standardised and not particularly graceful; they are based on variable rhythms, spanning from dynamic and frenetic sequences to scenes based on calm, reflection, and silence. Characters often engage in deep-themed dialogues and deal with surprising subjects and, at times, not without a pinch of malice; they find themselves in intriguing plots and have well-balanced psychologies that evolve over time (Baricordi, De Giovanni, Pietroni, Rossi, & Tunesi, 1991; Lamarre, 2009; Tavassi, 2017).

French scholar Jean-Marie Bouissou argued that a particularly cogent element in anime/manga is that they may satisfy in a vicarious and simulative form the six fundamental psychological needs of the person, and by such intensity that the young watcher/reader’s fruition becomes a truly emotional experience, and therefore a chance for personal growth (Bouissou, 2011, pp. 138–48). In Freud’s theory (1923), as also revisited in the context of Bruno Bettelheim’s analysis of puberty rites (1954) and fairy tales (1976), the interaction of Ego and Id in the individual’s mind—especially children and teenagers—gives rise to six fundamental needs: of power, safety, self-realisation, distinction, excitement, and escapism (not to be confused with Abraham H. Maslow’s motivational pyramidal models of five or eight needs, in Maslow, 1943 and 1970). Bouissou writes:

Those who have even just browsed through any *shōnen* or *shōjo* manga [addressed in Japan to male and female teenagers respectively] know that their plots are full of traumas and primary desires, common to any teenager in the world. They are filled with all of the Id’s constants: the pain for the separation from the mother, the conflict with the father and the rebellion against the authority, the questions and curiosity about the mystery of sexuality, girls’ fear to undergo sexual violence, boys’ fear of castration or impotence, the uncertainties about one’s own body and personality (which are both still developing), and the fear of death, which parents are resoundingly wrong to believe as beyond the range of their offspring’s thoughts and fears. In this sense, manga for teenage readers speaks to them way better than almost any [European or North American] comic book (Bouissou, 2011, p. 139).<sup>2</sup>



Bouissou's discourse about manga is easily and with no problems applicable to anime, which share with manga basically the whole set of stories, themes, contents, and story-telling strategies. The fascination with anime among foreign audiences, as anticipated above, may work on both the universal and particular layers, involving many aspects of anime's imagery, contents, and proposed morals, as well as multicultural thematics and values. As said before, a notion has been circulated in much scholarship as well as within the Japanese government according to which anime's popularity would be mainly or solely due to its being 'cool', whereas recent research shows that it is elsewhere that the audience's affection for anime is to be found and analysed: namely, in the emotional features of anime's narratives rather than in the, however (often, but far from always) spectacular, visual aspects. The case of the celebrated manga/anime series *One Piece* shows a few points that may hold a general validity in a transnational/transcultural framework.

*One Piece* (by Ōda Ei'ichirō, 1997–ongoing) is the best-selling comic book of all time, both in Japan and overseas. At the time when these lines are composed, it is a manga series of about 930 chapters and an animated series of as many episodes airing in many countries, 14 animated feature films, 13 special movies produced for the home-video, no less than 32 video game versions, more than 50 official songs in addition to the various soundtracks, a long novel series, and a huge variety of illustrated books with the key drawings of manga and anime as well as sketches, paintings, *ad hoc* illustrations. In the next four highest positions in the history of manga sales are the adventurous *Dragon Ball* (1984–95) by Toriyama Akira, the funny and long-lived *Kochira Katsushika-ku Kameari kōen-mae hashutsujo* (since 1976 and better known as *Kochikame*, by Akimoto Osamu), the sport-themed *Slam Dunk* (1990–96) by Inoue Takehiko, and the ninja-themed *Naruto* (1999–2014) by Kishimoto Masashi. Except for *Kochikame*, all the others have been and/or are currently sales champions in many other countries as well as in Japan.

After the conclusion of *Dragon Ball* in 1995 (*One Piece* was never its direct competitor, if we exclude the occasional co-presence due to reprints or spin-offs of Toriyama's manga), *One Piece* is the title selling more than any other comic book in the world and it also surpasses many novels in sales: in 2010 it beat *Harry Potter*. In 2011 only, the *One Piece* publications sold 37,996,373 copies in Japan alone, whereas *Naruto*, the second most successful manga of its time, reached 6,874,840. (Anime News Network, 2011, 2012; Oricon News, 2012).

It is no coincidence that, in this group of best-sellers, *Kochikame* is the only manga little known in Europe: it is a gag-based series strongly tied to Japan's society and humour, as well as to its metropolitan culture. It is possible to notice that Japanese publishing and production companies, despite having had the ability to export many elements and sectors of Japan's modern as well as ancient culture, are faced with a contradiction in the face of perceptions of the country abroad. Japanese culture is appreciated overseas especially in its 'traditional' aspects: its classic heritage is admired and accepted 'as-is', with a charge of exoticism that is perceived and taken for granted by overall non-Japanese observers; Japan's current, contemporary culture is, instead, often neglected due to the perception, by foreign publics, of a mark of otherness seen as dissonant, incomprehensible. In-between are degrees of a perceived blend of 'foreign' cultural elements and 'Japanese' cultural elements, here understood, in an essentialist view, as 'pure' and 'native'.



This can apply to anime as well. Consider the manga and anime of the *jidaimono* ('period story') genre: they are set in ancient feudal Japan, including samurai, ninja, cruel lords and massacres. In *jidaimono* stories, Japan—given how it is told in the fiction—is perceived, by most foreign observers, as in a state of cultural integrity, a stage of 'purity' previous to the subsequent age in which contacts with the US-American and European powers were initiated. On the opposite side of this hypothetical graduated continuum, which spans from a presumed 100% authenticity to the total fusion of local and foreign elements, we find works precisely such as *One Piece*. In it, we have a *pot-pourri* of extreme situations and visual styles: a baroque mix of iconographic, narrative, and moral references, to the benefit of Japanese readers—manga sales and derivative products are in Japan way more successful than in the rest of the world—but which obviously readers and viewers of countries like South Korea, France, Italy, Germany, Spain, and others do not disdain.

Thus, on the one hand, many relevant manga/anime featuring current Japanese culture 'as-is' are either ignored and left unpublished in many countries, as in the case of *Kochikame*, even though those countries' audiences may be receptive of manga and anime; or, at most, Japanese culture is adapted and downgraded by removing the characteristics considered most connoting: just think of the hundreds censorial adaptations suffered by Japanese animated series in France, United States, and various other countries; from the 1960s to the late 1990s, the Japanese origin, characters' names, and production credits of the vast majority of anime series broadcast in the United States and Europe were, in fact, usually hidden/erased, with the partial exception of Italy, where adaptations were, often, culturally more transparent (Benecchi, 2005, pp. 103–23; Bbfc, 2017; Daliot-Bul & Otmazgin, 2017, pp. 32–43; Pellitteri, 2010, pp. 389–413; Pellitteri, 2018a, 1: 671–713).

On the other hand, there is a great amount of anime with various degrees of cultural syncretism, which, data indicate, were for this reason more easily purchased by producers and television executives of foreign countries. We can frame this phenomenon as a spontaneous form of 'strategic hybridism', to use Iwabuchi Kōichi's notion (Iwabuchi, 2002): a convenient, win-win strategy in the eyes of European brokers and broadcasting policy makers (Pellitteri, 2019). A discourse which the present discussion partly converges with is in an essay by Fabienne Darling-Wolf on the gap between notions of 'West' and 'East' and between Japanese pop culture, American fan audiences, and European (in Darling-Wolf's study, French) nostalgics of old anime (Darling-Wolf, 2015, pp. 101–23). Darling-Wolf presents the case of two series enormously famous in France and Italy, which we will mention again later on: *UFO Robo Grendizer* (Tōei Animation, 74 eps, science fiction, 1975–77) and *Candy Candy* (Tōei Animation, 115 eps, Bildungsroman, 1976–79); but among the most important points of her work is, perhaps, the emphasis on 'U.S. academic cultural imperialism' in the debate on anime's journeys overseas, and the need to overcome it once and for all (117–20).

When we think of the *One Piece* franchise, a term we could use is *pastiche*, due to Ōda's ability to mix tropes coming from different genres. *One Piece* is a series centred on comedy and the absurd: the world imagined by the author, which we would rationally judge as to be detached from the real Earth (by geography, physical laws, fauna and flora, etc.), is actually very rich in humanity and references to the imagery of 'traditional' adventure literature: the theme of sea pirates, first of all. But this time, utterly absurd pirates. And winds with unusual names, galleons and other fantastic boats and ships stemming from the pencil

of a visionary creator who, even though Japanese, is a zealous reader of Euro-American pirate literature and movies, from Stevenson and Errol Flynn on. Let us also notice that, in *One Piece*'s world, which mimics ours, tides move in unpredictable ways, on a terraqueous globe that has nothing of ours but, in the tacit narrative pact between author and readers, is exactly our Earth, enough so for what it takes to make the plots of the series go forward. The world of the aforementioned *Dragon Ball*, too, is a blend of imaginary scenarios and vague allusions to our real world, but a universe with talking animals, dragons, aliens, extramundane entities, and more. The world of *One Piece* powers this attitude towards the fantastic up to higher levels, via grafts of outright surrealism: retro-technological machines, impossible animals, magical plants and fruits that provide special powers to those who eat them, and other 'follies', through which Ōda's imagination runs at full speed as much as that of children or that of dreams do. In fact, one of the reasons for the success of manga is their creators' ability to tune into the *pre-extant* fantastic world of children and youths, and not just to help create new imageries.

In effect, the striking success in time and space of stories—for example—like the manga, then anime series *Versailles no bara* or *Lupin III* and many more suggests that the more the creators of a manga/anime manage to bring features of Japanese culture and society (verbal and visual languages, relationships and dialectics among characters, values and sentiments promulgated) *together* with cultural elements more frequent in other areas of the world (settings and sceneries, costumes, objects, characters' psychologies), the higher will be the probability that such work, other conditions being satisfied, will gain a 'universal' success. This, nonetheless, is not an inflexible causal law: there are highly successful manga and anime that do not fully meet this condition. Yet they are in far lower positions than works such as *One Piece*. In the recent past or currently, the manga franchises and their anime versions that have been able to blend 'Japanese' and 'foreign' elements have met with tremendous success abroad; let us think of another top-seller manga/anime series, *Meitantei Conan* (1994–, by Aoyama Gōshō), apparently a typically Japanese detective story, but based on the structures of the old European scientific detection novellas (E. A. Poe, A. C. Doyle), which in turn were already in the 1930s emulated with talent by Japanese crime story writers such as Edogawa Ranpō. The complete name of this franchise's protagonist is, in fact, Edogawa Konan: a homage to both Edogawa Ranpō and Arthur Conan Doyle, *Sherlock Holmes*'s creator. It seems, then, that Iwabuchi's 'strategic hybridism' and multiculturalism sublimate here.

## 5. On the success of anime in the European contexts

Having clarified a theoretical framework for anime, here intended as a transnational media form able to appeal to different audiences via its compelling contents and visual storytelling, we will now discuss the examples of Italy and France as the two most relevant cases by history and revenues, in relation to their population. We will highlight four key aspects that are here applied specifically to these two markets, but that could be used as layers of analysis for any country where anime/manga are circulated. In the next four short paragraphs, we synthetically describe these four dimensions of assessment; subsequently, we will corroborate them with further discussion, sources, and data.

The first factor to be taken into account is the number of Japanese animated series and films that aired in the country under scrutiny through national or nationwide syndicated

broadcastings, or feature-length movies that were released theatrically or at least as direct-to-video. In the case of Italy and France, the number of anime works released since 1959 is particularly high. In Italy, the number of anime (series, mini-series, films) distributed nationwide amounts, from 1976 to 2018, to over 1500 titles (Anime Click, 2020; Baricordi et al., 1991; Castellazzi, 1999; Marazzi, Pappaletta, & Trevisan, 2006). In France, the number is about 1200, making it the second European country for number of anime distributed nationwide, as catalogued in Planète Jeunesse, 2020.

The second factor to consider should be the amount, sales, and relevance of Japan-related press for youths circulated in the given country: both manga titles and licensed press for kids. In Italy and France, the number of manga series and volumes as well as of manga/anime-centred publications for kids published from the late 1970s on is enormous, for variety, circulation, and copies sold; so much so that, also in this respect, France and Italy are the two non-Asian countries with the highest number of published manga titles and cognate illustrated press and merchandising for youths (Anime Click, 2020; Castellazzi, 1999; Di Fratta, 2005, pp. 61–174; Manga News, 2020).

The third dimension to consider is the frequency of references to Japanese animation and comics (and related subjects) in the general press; that is, the depth of penetration into the mainstream media and public discourse of the country where anime (and manga) are exported. In the case of France and Italy, also this factor was and is particularly developed; more on this later on.

The fourth factor is the media history and impact of merchandised toys related to Japanese fictional characters, which, in the two countries we are using as revealing cases, are again the most relevant recorded in any non-Asian market (Bono & Castelli, 1983; Bouissou, 2011; Castellazzi, 1999; Pellitteri, 2014a; Pruvost-Delaspre, 2016b; Signora, 2010).

We will now provide quick but solid data and sources to further corroborate the four dimensions summarised above. A first and telling example is a simple comparison with the United States, the national market that is often believed to be the most central and important for the exportation of anime and manga. In 2016 only, for instance, in France (population: 67.6 million) 13.6 million copies of manga were sold; the same year, in the United States (population: 325.4 million), fewer than 2.8 million copies were (Hibbs, 2017; Kubo, 2017). The number of Japanese animated films and TV series released in Italy and France since 1978 is the highest in all non-Asian countries; compared with the United States, the ratio has been about 4–1 until the beginning of the 2000s. Furthermore, unlike in the United States, in Italy and France anime have been and are still released mostly nationwide, and home-video editions have been more numerous in these two countries than in any other (Japan aside), as the sources in the bibliography of this article document.

Additionally, the relative importance of any set of foreign media-commodities and fictional narratives in a foreign national context is not decided via the sale figures only. The dimensions that give substance to the social-cultural penetration of a set of products and characters in a local context have to be measured on the basis of a more diverse set of indicators. For instance, the overall population: it matters little if the volumes of a successful manga like *Naruto* sell 150,000 copies in the United States and 30,000 in Italy, since the population of the US amounts to 325 million and that of Italy to 59 million, and, moreover, since the number of published manga titles in Italy is by far higher than in the

US (Alverson, 2018a; Brienza, 2016; Zaccagnino & Contrari, 2007 and 2018b; Anime Click, 2020; Manga News, 2020).

Two further, crucial indicators are anime/manga's media coverage in the mainstream press and the usage of words and references to their characters and tropes in television variety shows, by notable persons of the show business or of the intellectual establishment, and even by politicians: especially in Italy, and secondarily in France, public figures have repeatedly mentioned Japanese anime's heroes in the press. These factors would prove the general depth of penetration of Japanese animation and manga's characters, clichés, and narrative situations in the mainstream and public discourses of a nation (Pellitteri, 2014b; Pruvost-Delaspre, 2016a and 2018a).

## 6. Unexpected transitions. Japanese animation in Europe in the late 1970s

It is today widely known that from the 1960s a few Japanese animated cinema and TV productions were distributed in the United States (Ladd & Deneroff, 2008; Rifas, 2004). The flow of TV anime towards Europe from the 1970s was facilitated by those earlier agreements between Japanese and American producers (Otmazgin, 2014, pp. 53–9). This precedent, up to a point, paved the way for collaborations between European television stations and/or production companies with Japanese studios and toy manufacturers (Kubo M., 2017; Pellitteri, 2010, pp. 367–85); the conditions of Japan's low cost labour in the 1980s encouraged networks, companies, brokers, and publishers from Germany, Italy, France, and the Netherlands—Taurus Film, Beta Film, Bastei Verlag, München Merchandising, RAI, DIC Entertainment, Polyscope—to co-produce series and films with Japanese studios. Basically, the success of anime (and manga) in Italy, France, Spain, and later other countries, was generated in the 1970s and 1980s through involuntary, spontaneous, uncontrolled, and unexpected policies of penetration into European markets based on very affordable prices (Bevilacqua, 1982, pp. 25–7; Rivera Rusca, 2012a and 2012b).

The history of anime in Europe, however, does not begin with TV broadcasting in the mid-1970s. Theatrical movies had already been released since 1959 and across the 1960s in Italy and then France, Spain, and other countries. Some films had even aired on Italian television in 1970, 1972, and 1976 (Tavassi, 2018), but these films had followed a different path from the one which we focus on here: they had travelled to Europe through festivals or minor theatrical distribution—releases in very few cinema theatres, in the afternoon, and for an audience of kids and their parents or grandparents. As for the animated TV shows, only a few of them had already been sold to European TV channels before 1975, without eliciting any particular attention: they were *Jungle taitei* ('Jungle's emperor', 1965–67) and *Ribon no kishi* ('The prince with the ribbon', 1967–68) by Mushi Production, which were broadcast in France on ORTF in 1972 and 1974, respectively; *Jungle taitei* had already also aired in Spain (TVE1, 1969, as *Kimba el leoncito*); in Spain, *Mach go go go* ('Go, go, Mach 5', 1967–68) by Tatsunoko Production had also aired (TVE2, 1971, as *Meteoro*).

The anime shows that aired in Italy and France in 1976–78 were the outcome of the dynamic hinted at above: Europe–Japan co-productions *Barbapapa* (id., Kss, Topcraft, Askania), *Alps no shōjo Heidi* ('Heidi, the girl from the Alps', Zuiyo), *Chiisana Viking Vikke* ('Little Viking Vikke', Zuiyo and Taurus), and *Mitsubachi Maya no bōken*

(‘Adventures of Maya the bee’, Zuiyo and Apollo Film), all made in 1974–75 and purchased by several European broadcasters. At a later stage some European companies, besides providing financial support, would also be involved in the creative process (Bainbridge, 2010). This was an outcome of the good results of the previous co-productions, as well as of the unexpected performance in Italy, France, and also Spain, of several series by studios such as Tōei Dōga and TMS (Yoshida, 2012); we make here special reference to the many TV series broadcast in Italy and France from 1978 on, among which *UFO Robo Grendizer* (in Italy from 4 April, in France from 3 July of that year), *Candy Candy* (in France from 18 September 1978, in Italy from 2 March 1980), *Uchū kaizoku Captain Harlock* (Tōei Animation, 1978–79 and 1982–84, 64 eps, in Italy from 9 April 1979, in France from 7 January 1980), and *Lupin III* (TMS, 1971–72, 1977–80, and 1984–85, 228 eps, in Italy from 30 September 1979). The first three are the most celebrated anime series ever in the two countries, the fourth is especially beloved in Italy (Castellazzi, 1999; Pellitteri & Giacomantonio, 2016; Pruvost-Delaspre, 2016a). Even all of this considered, the relevance of the anime’s characters that came *before* these had been limited: it was hardly known that Vikke or the Barbapapas were made in Japan, because of their European or vague settings and local editing, which rigged them as Euro-American or of indefinite origin. It was following up the unexpected success of *UFO Robo Grendizer & Co.* in Italy and France that many European producers and licensing distribution companies started to engage in frenzy commercial relations with Japanese IP holders for multiple purchases of anime series and films.

Since the late 1970s, therefore, Italian, French, and Spanish companies specialised in the syndicated licensing of foreign shows or co-productions (ITB, DEA, Doro TV Merchandising, AB International, BRB Internacional, and others), as well as executives from public and private channels, began to purchase many series from Japanese property holders. In Italy, in particular, the sudden proliferation of local, small private stations after 1976—about 400: a unique record in Europe (Emanuelli, 2016)—turned into a substantial, almost daily, supply of foreign shows. In France, the release of anime on television followed a path similar to the one that was undertaken in Italy; however, the quite lower number of available channels and a strictly regulated protectionism towards French- and European-produced shows (Peltier, 1999; Sauvage & Veyrat-Masson, 2012) did not permit the airing of anime series in France in a number as massive as in Italy.

The situation of unexpected success of anime in 1980s Europe was, however, a historical and transient one: after the end of the 1990s, a change in narrative media’s consumption models occurred. In terms of media flows, it is possible to argue that the first success of anime and manga abroad was in fact due to their arrival in foreign markets in an age dominated by specific modes of media consumption: the crisis of such success, which occurred at later stages, was due to a change of how media are experienced. Starting from the beginning of the 2000s, a different, negative trend started which was caused, among the various factors, by the increased prices of the licensing rights for anime series and manga titles. This led European television networks to buy fewer and fewer Japanese animation series: the polemics about anime’s alleged visual violence played only a small part in this process, dictated primarily by economic factors and new EU’s policies in matter of acquisitions of foreign television shows (BBFC, 2017; Milano, 2017). Along this wake, European comic book publishers became reluctant to buy long manga series, given the increasing difficulties in the contractual conditions

demanded by a majority of Japanese publishers. This was the core of the answers we received in many interviews with acquisition managers of both TV stations and comics publishers about the reasons why anime series are not purchased anymore by European TV stations and why the licenses of manga acquired today are for titles that in Japan have already folded. In other words, since the mid-2000s, the original reasons for the continuing presence of Japanese entertainment products in the previous 35 years were somewhat forgotten or overlooked: hence the new managerial breakthrough has been damaging, year after year, the capital of popularity that had been accumulated by anime and manga in the countries that had proved to be the most receptive and advantageous in terms of both economic and cultural penetration.

This is, up to a point, corroborated by the statements of animation director Anno Hideaki, the author of *Shinseiki Evangelion* (Gainax, 26 eps, science fiction, 1995), who prefigures an irreversible decline of anime if companies do not run for cover in various ways, in particular by dramatically changing ‘the current model of commercial management’ (Ashcraft, 2015).

## **7. Conclusion. Persistent heroes: the ‘national-popular’ quality of anime’s characters**

In these last remarks we propose an interpretation of the sociocultural importance of the hundreds of anime series broadcast in France and Italy from 1976 on. We provide discussion about the emotional causes of the audience’s affection for them. Besides the structural reasons for the massive mainstream circulation of anime, it is in fact necessary to take into account the reasons of subjective reception, personal taste, and diversity of perspectives among the very young audience (3–14 y.o.) and its enthusiastic response on one side, and the worried view of adults on the other side.

Let us consider first the causes of anime’s success among youths and the controversies raised by parents, teachers, and politicians. In pretty much every country where it arrived, the reasons why Japanese animation, in its entirety, was greeted enthusiastically by children and teenagers were the same that raised serious concerns among adults: dramatic stories, horizontal seriality, a certain realism in the display of graphic scenes, sacrifice and death, the poverty of animation (limited and selective, but at a very great visuo-narrational pace; see Gan, 2013; Lamarre, 2009), bright colours, a sensational variety of narrative genres (as indexed in Baricordi et al., 1991). Moreover, the shifts in meaning and understanding of these animated television programs and feature films from the original context to foreign cultural environments. The strategies of editing or ‘censorship’ adopted for anime series had in different countries various degrees of invasiveness; nonetheless, the cut of scenes deemed as pedagogically ambiguous and the renaming of characters using European-sounding names was carried out for many series and in many countries. Differently from what happened almost anywhere else, however, editing strategies in Italy—and partly, in France—did not hide the Japanese origin, which was instead clearly seen in the credits at the beginning or the end of the episodes: the audience was always well aware that anime were Japanese, and so the understanding of anime’s Japaneseness and of their cultural contents was not as compromised as it was in other European countries where anime series aired (Parini, 2012; Pruvost-Delaspre, 2016a).



The conditions of anime's presence in Japan and overseas have dramatically changed at the end of the 1990s. Such change mainly consisted of innovations in the ways of distribution, which produced a cultural shift in the modes of consumption. This process intertwines with two further, interrelated factors: the almost total disappearance of anime series from general broadcastings both in Japan and abroad, also due to new trends in the anime industry, which started to privilege more mature and narrowcast-driven productions over stories for a broader target of kids; and the change in the consumption habits not just for this form of entertainment but for any audio-visual content. As in the 1990s and 2000s the controversy over anime in Europe flared up and then faded, the influence of those shows in the key European markets declined mainly because of commercial dynamics: an increase in prices for the sale of rights and more strict contractual conditions, as touched upon in a previous section. Meanwhile, the innovations of digital communication—cable and internet television, P2P traffic—made it possible for fans as well as for general viewers of all ages to access any television show, including anime, from their home computers: in either legal (free or pay-per-view) or illegal (by streaming or pirated downloads) form.

In parallel with this process of quasi-desertification of Japanese animation from European television channels, viewers were able to draw not only from the internet, but also from another once again promising source, cinema: from the 2000s, the presence of anime films in Italian, French, German, Spanish, Finnish, and Swedish theatres has been gradually revived and seems to be enjoying growing successes, thanks both to the exploits of the films by Miyazaki Hayao and Studio Ghibli (*Spirited Away*, *Ponyo*, and others) and to various special screening events. These processes coincided with the turnover of anime's audiences. The first generation of French and Italian anime viewers are now almost 50 years old and have changed their tastes. In many cases, abandoning anime: after all, a good part of anime is still addressed to a public of adolescents and is a form of entertainment requiring a certain involvement in terms of time and concentration. And the next generation and a half, who today are 35 years old or younger, have adopted the aforementioned new ways of fruition, which completely bypass the television medium and favour a personalised consumption through the infinite choice offered by the internet. The new generations of anime viewers are no longer above all children, but rather late teenagers and young adults.

It has already been established that complex dynamics in the distribution and reception of these products in Europe were at play in the 1970s and 1980s (Kubo, 2002). This translated into a growing influence that anime, since the 1980s, had on the aesthetics of foreign animation and on the poetics of filmmakers, animators, artists, musicians, even fashion designers from Europe, Asia, and the United States. Various observers explain anime's success among audiences of diverse ages, all coming from a great variety of cultures, alternatively via the importance of cultural practices and social engagement (Fennell, Liberato, Heyden, & Fujino, 2012) and the 'ubiquitousness' of the merchandising (Steinberg, 2012). These reasons do play an important role, but there is a deeper, multi-layered key factor.

On a first level, this popularity resides in the fact that Japanese animation filmmakers treat their material—the stories, the characters, and the techniques of *mise en scène*—with as main beneficiary the hearts of the spectators, their feelings; not their eyes. The technical perfection and cinematic virtuosity of today's Japanese animation are very precious,



but, we would say, collateral additions to a primarily narratological and emotional core that has been schooling since the 1960s in a creative industry where the technical limits due to small budgets have been bypassed through a narrative and dramaturgic intensity that has almost no correspondence in non-Japanese animation.

On a second level, we have anthropological factors for this success, related to the deep structure of the reception and internalisation of the fantastic worlds narrated in anime stories, which make us understand how these phantasmagorical and imaginary universes, connoted in a both ancient and modern or hypermodern Japanese culture, have prospered for 40 years and continue to be so successful in Europe among several generations of general viewers as well as of fans. Observers who have not really studied the primary subject matter of Japanese cartoons (that is, their contents) would be tempted to think of possible comparable cases in terms of popularity among young and very young audiences, like multi-, cross-, and transmedia franchises such as *Star Wars*, *Star Trek*, *The Lord of the Rings*. The penetration of the themes of these Anglo-Saxon narrative universes into their fans' lives and psychological experiences is certainly profound: it involves many dimensions of their everyday life or at least consumption tactics and certain lifestyles; at times, even their general world-views. But there is a big difference with anime: whereas *Star Wars* or *Lord of the Rings* are unitary and unifying universes, anime is a very diverse, varied literary *corpus* of stories that usually have not much in common with each other, and whose similarities—those that made adult observers believe that anime were 'all the same'—are to be found in this industry-driven technical standardisation of the visual features. Japanese animators instead, to be fair, work on the *variatio* of visual features as a purely instrumental, formal vehicle through which they propose deep content; that is, they more often than not focus on the *narratives* rather than on visual creation; although fine drawing plays a primary role in some productions and in the work of a few truly outstanding character designers, e.g. Sugino Akio, Amano Yoshitaka, the late Araki Shingo, etc.

In a creative process to which one could assign the status of heterogenesis of the ends, on the one hand toy companies have always pressed animation studios to create moving narratives and stories with 'mechanisms', at the same time *literally* intended (robots or spaceships: so-called 'mecha' in adventure and science fiction stories) and *literarily* intended (captivating stories, able to excite the attraction of spectators). On the other hand, scriptwriters, directors, and animators have handled well narrative and visual materials often banal and bound to the reproduction in industrial series, creating in the end narrations characterised by a dramaturgical depth that was barely manageable by children: alien invasions, atomic explosions, the violence of life, death and destruction, the difficulties of adolescence, love, sacrifice and personal responsibility; but, just for that reason, a depth that children adored, because it resonated with their imaginary and interiority. In treating children and adolescents as adults *in potentia*, Japanese animators have formed—without even wanting to, because anime were/are *not* originally intended for foreign markets—a universal link, a true emotional alliance and allegiance with viewers from other countries, whether or not the latter knew the origin of these products. This, multiplied by a very high number of series disseminated during a relatively short period of years, produced this profound and widespread affection.

We therefore could, metaphorically speaking, define all this as a chain reaction. And a boom that in some countries was bigger and more longstanding than in others. In Italy and, to a similar extent, in France, anime has become a form of mainstream and multi-

generational entertainment, a socially relevant body of works: well ‘above’ a subcultural status. It is a process that has spanned more than forty years. In some cases, just as the aforementioned Grendizer and Candy (and others), some Japanese characters have become ‘literary’ heroes and at times even role models that we can label as *nazionale-popolare*, to adopt Antonio Gramsci’s terminology (Gramsci, 1975, III, *Letteratura e vita nazionale* [‘Literature and the nation’s life’], Quaderno 21 [‘Notebook 21’, 1934–35]: ‘Problemi della cultura nazionale italiana; I: Letteratura popolare’ [‘Problems of Italian national culture; I: Popular literature’], section ‘Concetto di nazionale-popolare’ [‘Notion of national-popular’]; see in particular p. 2114 ff.). For Gramsci, *nazionale-popolare* (‘national-popular’) refers to tales, heroes, and tropes found in a body of narrative works in which a country’s populace sees itself reflected as a situated group, because of a perceived representativeness in the national collectivity of those narrative works. In fact, a particularity of a certain, relevant amount of anime characters in the Italian/French context lies in what, as has been recently shown (Di Fratta, 2017), some of them are now so entrenched in the local culture that they have gained relevance in the public discourse (Nittoli, 2014) as national-popular figures, despite the fact that they are recognised *as Japanese* by the public and the media—which, in itself, is another oddity—since anime’s entrance into the local mediascapes in the late 1970s. The fact that many anime series and their characters have been celebrated in these latest years in the mainstream media (Pellitteri, 2018a: I, 499–641; II, 1243–67) is proof that for a large part of the audience and even for Italy and France’s media ecology itself they are *persistent heroes*: a generational ‘glue’ linking the memories of a broad and united audience spanning from their mid-30s to, nowadays, their early 50s.

These processes of mainstream penetration and cultural performativity/representativeness in Italy and France should therefore be taken into serious consideration in the comparative study of anime/manga’s popularity in any given national context, as well as by the Japanese media actors and policy makers who are trying to explore/exploit the cultural appeal of these media forms.

## Notes

1. For the sake of brevity rather than privacy, we provide the names and nationalities of the companies where a few of them work(ed), sorted by field: cinema and television distribution (RAI, Mediaset, RTV38, Italy; NHK, Japan; Finnkino Cinemas, Cinema Mondo, Finland; Polsat, Poland; Impact, Sweden; Crunchyroll, Wakanim, NoLife TV, France; BRB Internacional, Spain); publishing and production or distribution (Tōei Animation, Wit Studio, Kōdansha, ShoPro, Aniplex, CoMix Wave Films, Japan; Dynit, KappaLab, Yamato Video, 001, Italy; Viz Media Europe, Kazé, France; Media3, Norma Editorial, Planeta-DeAgostini, Spain; Anime Unlimited, UK; Tammi, Finland; Okami, Waneko, Studio JG, Poland); companies and institutions (Sony Creative Products and Sony Music, Nippon Columbia, Aube, Japan Foundation, JETRO, Japan; Raw Fury, Sweden; BBFC, UK); festivals and museums (Kyōto International Manga Museum, Hiroshima International Animation Festival, Tokyo International Film Festival, Japan; Lucca Comics & Games, Cartoons on the Bay, Spazio Wow, Italy; Anney, Japan Expo, France; Närcon, Sweden; Desucon, Tracon, Finland). Besides informants working for these companies or institutions, we also conducted interviews with artists and other professionals, not directly associable to companies or institutions.
2. Refined confirmations on this are in Ray, Plante, Reysen, Roberts, & Gerbasi, 2017 and Reysen, Plante, Roberts, & Gerbasi, 2017; however, *contra* Bouissou, cf. Pigot, 2011.

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